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ABSTRACT

The educational reform movement, with its heavy emphasis on restructuring and collaboration, has brought into the open a serious credibility gap between teachers and the role that schools of education and the education professorate have played in educational development and leadership. Many teachers believe that professors do not understand, or have lost touch with, the realities of public school education and have no accurate concept of what goes on in the classroom. Using a traditional elementary education program as an example, this paper describes the collaborative mentorship program, a professional approach to teacher education designed to establish credibility between and among teachers and professors due to the level and depth of collaboration involved. The approach offers the following: (1) more relevant and less redundant methods courses; (2) more field experiences; (3) no additional semester hours in the program; (4) no additional financial expenditures; (5) no additional faculty positions; (6) real and meaningful collaboration with public schools; and (7) leadership in educational philosophy and practice. The collaborative mentorship program almost completely eliminates the need for regular faculty to supervise student teachers. The approach allows all to work from their strengths, and it allows for greater flexibility for student placement. Overall the mentorship program is considered a true collaborative approach that benefits everyone. Contains 14 references. (LL)

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A Collaborative Field Based Elementary Education Program: Bridging the Credibility Gap Between Teachers and Teacher Training Programs

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A Collaborative Field Based Elementary Education Program: Bridging the Credibility Gap Between Teachers and Teacher Training Programs

Teacher education programs have always been targets of criticism, but the educational reform movement, with its heavy emphasis on restructuring and collaboration, has brought into the open a serious credibility gap. As teachers become more empowered and are more involved in decision making and become change agents, they are openly questioning the historic role that Schools of Education and the education professoriate have played in educational development and leadership (Ciscell, 1993; Fullan, 1993; Kagan, 1993a; Brennan & Simpson, 1993; Kennedy, 1991). Many believe that professors do not understand, or have lost touch with the realities of public school education, and have no accurate concept of what goes on in the classroom (Kagan, 1993b; Negin, 1993).

While collaborative efforts are being advocated by reformers as an ideal marriage of higher education and the public schools, far too often teachers see it as contrived collegiality instead of true collaboration. Many do not want to involve higher education in school reform. They simply do not believe professors know what they are doing. To these teachers, promoting methodologies is vastly different from doing them. Rubenstein (1994) states most educations professors fall into one of three categories: those who left the public schools because they did not want to teach there; those who were asked to

leave the public schools; and those who have never taught in the public schools

The Experience Factor

In many cases the teachers have a valid point. Nationwide, the typical education professor has less than five years experience as a school teacher, and thirty percent of the education professors have no experience at all as a school teacher (Ducharme & Agne, cited in Ciscell). One can understand a highly competent and experienced teacher's credibility concern with a professor who has little or no teaching experience in the schools, yet is acclaimed as an authority and used as a consultant. This is especially true in areas such as methodology and classroom management.

The problem could be eased somewhat if colleges of education placed stronger emphasis on school teaching experiences rather than attempting to meet only minimal accreditation standards for experience. Unfortunately, this is not going to happen. Far too many education professors and school of education administrators place little real value on school teaching experience. Professors' reputations are based on academic credentials and scholarship, not on teaching experience in the schools. Consequently, in a situation that is unique to the education profession, students are being prepared to become teachers by many professors who have little or no experience as teachers. These same professors often serve as consultants and may well be involved with the collaborative efforts of the reform movement. This is not to say that they are incompetent, but their lack of experience is easily detected by experienced teachers. Teachers resent this and feel they are being treated in a cavalier manner. As teachers become more and more empowered through reform efforts and become more involved in collaborative efforts, the credibility gap widens and teachers become far more vocal. But this credibility problem is not

just limited to the less experienced professors. Any experience that is not of recent vintage is often questioned. With far too many teachers, the entire professoriate is suspect.

Collaborative Mentorship

But the situation is not totally negative and hopeless. The collaborative mentorship program is one solution to the credibility problem. It provides a positive, professional approach to teacher education, and an end product that is well prepared to enter the teaching profession. It also establishes credibility between and among teachers and professors due to the level and depth of collaboration involved.

Most everyone, even professors with limited teaching experience, agree there is a need for more field experience for education majors. This is usually equated with more practica courses, new hours added to the program, more travel expenses, heavier teaching loads, scheduling problems, and additional faculty. Because of these factors, it is often difficult to add substantial field base components to existing programs.

In contrast, the collaborative mentorship approach offers the following (Bloodsworth, 1993):

1. More relevant and less redundant methods courses
2. More field experience
3. No additional semester hours to the program
4. No additional financial expenditures
5. No additional faculty positions
6. Real and meaningful collaboration with public schools
7. Leadership in educational philosophy and practice

Restructuring the Existing Program

Using a traditional elementary education program as an example,

certain changes need to be made to build the foundation for this approach. A basic methods course that includes lesson plans, units, learning centers, and other components unique to the particular program would be taken as the first methods course. Since the generic basics are covered, not as much time would be need in the other methods courses to teach the specific theoretical applications. The social studies and language arts methods courses can be combined into one course. The same is done with the science and math methods courses. This will reduce redundancy among the methods courses, expand the concept of integration of subject matter, and decrease the compartmentalization of subject matter. The end product will be more relevant methods courses. Specific practical application experience will be acquired during the supervised practica that will be taken concurrently with each of the combined courses.

The Practica Component

The two three semester hour practica courses are similar except for discipline content. Each meets in an assigned school (ideally a professional development school) with the professor present the entire time. Instructional and managerial techniques and approaches can be observed, discussed, and practiced on site as well as discussed in the theoretical setting of the concurrent methods course. Students are provided substantial supervised and structured sequential and incremental experiences. The entire school faculty and staff is involved in this collaborative effort and the education students will receive invaluable experience as a result. The students will have opportunities to work with numerous teachers and to work on different grade levels. The professors will be working very closely with the teachers, and the teachers will have major

input into the course. There is much research to support this concept of incorporating experienced teachers into teacher training programs (Heikkinen *et al* , 1992; Smith, 1992).

Student Teaching

While the student teaching component differs from the traditional programs, there is research to support the superiority of the mentorship approach over the more traditional approaches (Hopkins and Moss, 1993). Student teaching has always been a problem area and traditionally there has been a considerable amount of disagreement between schools of education and the public schools concerning student teaching (Harris and Harris, 1992; Cochran-Smith, 1991).

Various segments of the mentorship student teaching can be adjusted to fit the specific needs of each educational program, but the following are essential:

1. Appoint the Cooperating Teachers Adjunct Faculty. Grant them faculty parking stickers, library privileges, respect and recognition as faculty members, and all the other amenities that normally go with adjunct faculty appointments in the institution.

2. Cooperating Teachers must meet specific professional criteria. Major considerations would be degrees, teaching experience, and teaching ability. They must also be willing to assume a professional leadership role and work with others to develop student teachers into master teachers and educational leaders of the future.

3. Cooperating Teachers will attend a special graduate supervision course. This course must be taken before supervising student teachers and serving as adjunct faculty. This inclusive course prepares them for their unique role in this collaborative effort. In addition to regular supervision content, the role and expectations of the university supervisor is also covered.

4. The Cooperating Teacher is both cooperating teacher and university

supervisor. Since the teacher is a master teacher as well as an adjunct faculty member, he or she can fulfill both roles. This is the heart of the program. The student teachers must perform on an even level all the time. This avoids any "grandstanding" the student may do for the professor during supervised visits. It also avoids the unnatural situation that may exist when the professor visits. The student is officially observed all the time. There is no "playing off" the professor and the teacher. Since the teacher has total responsibility, he or she will work hard to develop the student teacher. The student has the advantage of being under the supervision of an experienced master teacher.

5. The Cooperating Teacher and the school of education must maintain contact. A meeting will be held each semester prior to the start of student teaching. During student teaching, the adjunct teacher will have a person or persons with whom to maintain contact. This can be done through phone calls, letters, faxes, or e-mail. If needed, visits can be made.

6. The student teachers also maintain contact with the school of education. The students are oriented to student teaching the week prior to going on the field. They return once a month for an all day seminar. They too have a contact person at the university in case there is need for such contact. They must never be made to feel they are being "dumped". Any problems that develop between the teacher and the student teacher can be mediated by an assigned professor.

7. There is a thorough review of each adjunct faculty member's performance at the end of each student teaching experience.

8. There is a thorough review of the program at the end of each academic year to make sure the program is effective and functioning properly. It also allows for any changes or modifications that may be needed. This review includes input from the adjunct faculty.

9. Adjunct faculty are treated as fellow collaborators and professionals at all times.

10. At least once a year there is a social for the adjunct faculty and the faculty. This is to maintain an *esprite de corps* and to stress the collaboration on a personal level.

Advantages

There are many advantages to this approach. It almost completely eliminates the need for regular faculty to supervise student teachers, yet the student teachers are being fully supervised by well qualified, experienced

professionals. This results in a saving of travel time and costs. Professors can be better utilized by having smaller classes and supervising the new practica courses at close by schools (professional development or similar situations). It also gives them more time to work with their students. All things considered, it cost less than the traditional approach, promotes real collaboration, and will do a far better job.

But perhaps the strongest advantage is that everyone is working from their strengths. Our present approach seems to do just the opposite. Working from our weaknesses instead of our strengths has been the cause of much of the credibility problem. There are many professors who have little or no classroom experience, but are excellent theorists. With their limited experience, field experience situations would not be their strengths. However, since the combined methods courses are now primarily theory based, these courses would be their strengths. Those with heavy field based experience could work in that area. Those lacking field experience as teachers could gain much knowledge and experience by assisting the more experienced in the field based courses. This would enhance their reputations and they would eventually gain respect as practitioners as well as theorists.

This approach also allows for greater flexibility for student placement. Since travel has more or less been eliminated, there is no need to be as restrictive as to where one can student teach. This could greatly benefit rural areas and help them with their certification problems. Students wishing to student teach in a rural area would become aware of rural learning characteristics and the unique problems of rural schools. Should they desire to teach there, they would be in a much stronger position to cope with the problems and become an effective teacher. Also, students who wish to teach in their home areas can now student teach there provided appropriate

arrangements can be made.

Another advantage is the applicability of this approach. This paper was limited to the elementary school, but the collaborative mentorship approach will work on all levels. Early returns from a current survey of teachers that is being conducted by the author seem to indicate a broad acceptance of the idea. To date, the strongest support has come from middle school teachers. This is particularly interesting because they (according to the same early survey returns) have indicated the greatest concern over the credibility problem and seem to have the strongest negative feelings toward professors and schools of education.

Conclusions

Overall, the mentorship program is a true collaborative approach that benefits everyone. It addresses the credibility problem in a positive manner without even acknowledging it exists. It provides students with vast experiences that are impossible to gain through a traditional approach. It is also more time and cost effective than the traditional approaches. With everyone working from their professional strengths, and working together as colleagues to develop master teachers and to improve schools and the educational system, all move forward in a positive manner.

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